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Eulogy

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Eulogy

Matt Mallard

Dear Mrs. Reich,
Dearest Mrs. Reich,
My Mrs. Reich,

For once in my life, it seems as though when it comes to you, I don't know what to say. No, that's not right. I do know what to say. I've been trying desperately to cling to the memories I have of you. I start with an early spring morning, and there are several of us huddled around your desk at break, the window in the corner open, the soft breeze bringing with it the aroma of the azaleas planted under the window. And we can't stay away from you hardly any time at all, because at lunch, we're holding down the fort while you rush outside to take your Mercedes for a spin around the local county roads to snatch a quick smoke break.

But even before that, I see our 10th grade American History CP class. You're seated at your desk, your glasses on the edge of your narrow nose, your silver bracelets jingling on your slender wrists, and your sand-dollar silver earrings swaying from your ears. Your brow takes on a dark look as you reach under the desk, getting ready to take your flip-flop and chunk it at John Mears after he asks you a ridiculous question. Before we know it, you're up at the chalkboard. As you hold the yellow piece

of chalk, you begin to write in your ever-so skilled calligraphy, dates and names and places that we should remember and write down in our notes. I lean over to Dana, one of my note-buddies, and make sure I'm getting it down right. Alex, from the other side of me, then has to ask me so he can get it down right. All the time, we're whispering, giggling, not yet fully immersed in Mrs. Reich's World. As you finish writing on the board, you toss your now two pieces of chalk onto the metal tray, brushing your hands together as it sends a cloud of yellow dust into the air the size of the clouds over Hiroshima after Truman ordered the attack in 1945.

We get Mercantilism and the American Revolution engraved in our heads. We all pass the Midterm. We move on into the Civil War. We finish the semester. We are "History Scholars!" Somewhere in there, one of us had the great idea to have a sleepover at your house. "You bring the alcohol, and I'll bring the cigarettes!" You laugh at the idea. Somehow, not too long after that, we find ourselves huddled in your kitchen as you make us coffee you know we won't drink.

The tradition continues, as we move on to the Eleventh grade. Having already had you in class, having already stolen the spirit-stick, which was under your supervision and care, from the Class of 04, we ventured into the next part of American History. Yellow journalism, the World Wars, and the Bay of Pigs is on the books for this year's syllabus.

Next thing we know, we're entering our senior year. Not only are we about to make one of the most

incredible and drastic changes in our lives, but we also don't have you for a class. We do our thing, go out in style, leave our mark on the school. For better or worse, we definitely left our mark. Then we're off to the Caribbean on our Senior Cruise. In what was quite easily one of the best weeks of my life, we attempted to say our goodbyes while making a few new memories we knew would last forever. I always remember you telling me two distinct things on our cruise. 1.) "When you marry someone, make sure you don't just love them. Make sure you like them. Because the giddy stage of love doesn't last forever. I love Philip, but I also like Philip. I like the kind of person he is. I like what he stands for. I like how he treats other people. He's my best friend." And 2.) "Some of the best friends you'll ever have you'll meet in college." At the time, the first made good sense. The second, not so much. I couldn't imagine being closer to a group of people than I was with the History Scholars, but you were right. As we all embarked on our own paths, we found less free-time to sit down and call up an old friend. But there's still something special about us. We may not be as close as we once were, but we have something that few other people can ever dream of having. And that will always make us special.

So I guess I do know what to say. I can say that you are the most incredible human being I've ever known. Whenever I'd get the rare occasion to drive over from Florence to come visit you one afternoon, you'd always tell me, "You'll have to help yourself. I'm not going to get up and get it for you. You're not a guest

here.” You never treated us like children (except when you were treating us like your own children), and you never judged us. You didn’t always like what we did and you made sure we knew it, but you never judged us.

When Ben called me up a couple weeks ago to give me the news, I could only think of one thing. I remember you telling me that if there were two things you knew anything about, it was history and interior decorating. You had told me that whenever I got out of college and got an apartment, you would help me fix it up. And as I was talking to Ben, I couldn’t help but think about that apartment that will never get your magic touch. And I can’t help but to think now in regret that I didn’t get a chance to come see you here recently. Or that I didn’t make the time. I just can’t imagine this world without you. And as I can’t help but to think that you leaving is going to rip a whole in my heart, my heart does begin to soften.

Because if you had not been in my life, then I wouldn’t have these beautiful memories of a beautiful woman who because she took a few more minutes out of her day to connect with a student made all the difference in my life. I am not who I am today without you. I’ll say it again incase you didn’t get it—I am not who I am today without you. But how can I be greedy? We’ve had seven wonderful years with you, and we’ll all see each other again someday. I believe that. I just can’t help but to think of all the talks I still imagined having with you. I imagined myself a few years from now when I finish my Master’s, coming up the stone walk to your front

door. Knocking and trying the door because it's always unlocked, I'd peer apprehensively into the front hall, peek into the dining room and Philip's study, and find you standing in the kitchen filling up your mug with coffee in one hand and a cigarette burning in the other. I'd imagine I'd sit down with you in your large, overstuffed-down couches, and tell you how my life was, tell you about my worldly experiences, expose my soul to you more deeply than I ever had before. And you'd tell me about your sons and your grandchildren. You'd tell me about Philip and how his band practice is going, how his latest case is beginning to drain him. You'd tell me about your latest home improvement project.

Now, I imagine myself going back to England one day. And remembering your story of how you sobbed over the list of dead American soldiers in St. Paul's. I'll see the Thames and see you in its spontaneity and reliability.

I hope to be like you one day. Strong. Courageous. Funny. Intelligent. Genuine. Tolerant. I want to be that kind of person. I only feel like my greatest contribution to your memory would be to pass those things on to other people. I wish I could be there with you when you read this. I wish I could be there, just telling you or reading this to you myself. I wish I could just sit and talk with you for hours and hours as we watch episode after episode after episode of Law and Order or HGTV. I always knew that if there was anyone who would tell me the truth straight to my face, then it was you. I got an awfully strong craving for that wisdom of yours in the past few

weeks. I kept telling myself, as soon as this play is over, I'll go see her. As soon as I have some free time, I'll go see her.

Well, now I'm taking my free time to write you this letter. To reemphasize in case I never told you enough or never made it quite clear enough just how much I love you. I think just hearing your voice, with its snide and sarcastic undertones but its honest and compassionate cadence, would make everything okay.

It's so hard to imagine life without you. But you must know that we'll be okay. Because we have each other. And we had you. And for that, we couldn't be more blessed.

I'm not sure what to say now that I've reached the end. Usually, I suppose it should be goodbye, but those are too depressing, too sad. So how about a "Bon Voyage," and I'll be seeing you real soon. You must know that we'll never forget you and everything you did for us. You'll always be in our hearts.

Much, much love to you and your family, always,

Matthew Mallard